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FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3026
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 6773
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 2102
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL IMMEDIATE 2840
RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA IMMEDIATE 0848
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA IMMEDIATE 3295
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE IMMEDIATE 4384
RUEHKO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO IMMEDIATE 1760
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI IMMEDIATE 6403
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/DISA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 001839

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [JA](#)

SUBJECT: PM ABE TRIES TO DEFUSE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE IN
ADVANCE OF U.S. TRIP

REF: A. TOKYO 1471

[1](#)B. TOKYO 1412

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Joe Donovan, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Prime Minister Abe is making a concerted effort to defuse the comfort women issue prior to his first summit with the President. Stung by foreign criticism of his earlier comments distinguishing different "degrees" of coercion used to bring women to comfort stations, in recent weeks Abe has remained silent on the issue or assiduously toed the line reaffirming the 1993 Kono statement of apology for Japan's role in World War II sex slavery. Pre-summit interviews with foreign and domestic media have focused on that reaffirmation and on personal expressions of "apology" and "sympathy" for the victims. Abe is clearly hoping to defuse this issue in advance of his U.S. trip. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe appears to have adopted a media strategy aimed at defusing U.S. concerns over his stance on the comfort women issue. In interviews with the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek, as well as in the Japanese press, the Prime Minister has clearly reaffirmed the 1993 Kono Statement and accepted Japan's responsibility for comfort stations to serve the Imperial Army. He has refused to allow himself to be baited to return to his earlier position downplaying official involvement in staffing the comfort stations.

[1](#)3. (C) Asked by Newsweek's Lally Weymouth whether he honestly believes the Imperial Army had not forced many of the comfort women to provide sexual services, Abe acknowledged Japan's responsibility for infringing human rights and said he looked on Japan's history "with humility." He expressed sympathy to the victims and apologized "as Prime Minister of Japan." He has provided similar responses in the Japanese press since shortly before his April 3 telephone conversation with the President. That telephone call received widespread attention in Japan, and was seen as an attempt by the Prime Minister to clear the air before his U.S. visit.

[1](#)4. (C) Elements of the domestic political opposition also continue to pursue the issue. In an April 20 written

response to an opposition Diet member, Abe reiterated that the 1993 Kono Statement represents the government's "basic position" on the comfort women issue. He also reaffirmed that the government has no objection to the 1948 decision of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal holding the Imperial Army responsible for forcing women to work as prostitutes. In a March reply to the same opposition Diet member, Abe had opened himself up to a firestorm of international condemnation by downplaying the evidence of official government coercion. Since then, he has sought to distance himself from those remarks.

15. (C) The United States is not the only source of foreign criticism on the matter. An Australian Embassy political officer told Embassy Tokyo that during Prime Minister Howard's April 13-14 Tokyo visit, following a very relaxed and friendly discussion of areas of close bilateral cooperation, Howard turned to Abe and bluntly informed him that Australia could not accept Abe's recent statements questioning Japan's responsibility in the comfort women issue. Abe's "body language changed completely," according to the Australian diplomat, who said Abe dropped back in his chair and gave a flat unenthusiastic statement reaffirming the Kono statement and indicating his sympathy of the suffering of wartime comfort women.

16. (C) Comment. Abe realizes he will be queried about comfort women while in the United States. He told Cabinet Press Club reporters on April 23 that if asked about the issue during his press availability following his meeting with the President, he plans to explain his "real intention" and to express his "sympathy" and "apology" toward former comfort women.

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